

Sacrifice and the Death of Christ

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When Christians think about sacrifice, they commonly make two assumptions. One is that sacrifice is essentially a way of dealing with the problem of sin. The other is that it deals with sin by causing God to stop being angry with us. Neither Old Testament nor New Testament supports these two assumptions. Sacrifice does sometimes have something to do with sin, but dealing with sin is not its main object. God does get angry, but sacrifice does not relate to God's anger.

The Meaning of Sacrifice

The New Testament speaks of sacrifice in a number of connections apart from seeing Jesus' death as a sacrifice that deals with sin. For instance, when we give ourselves to God in response to God's giving himself to us, it is an act of sacrifice (Romans 12). Paul talks about being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of the Philippians' faith and of the Philippians' gifts to him as an offering to God (Phil 2:17; 4:18). When we testify to what God has done, it is a sacrifice of praise (Heb 13:15).

The New Testament's way of thinking coheres with the Old Testament's way of thinking in this respect. In the Old Testament there are a number of reasons for offering a sacrifice; the most systematic account of them comes in Leviticus 1 - 7. First, there is the whole burnt offering, when people sacrifice a whole animal to God. They give up the entire animal. It really is a sacrifice. Second, there is the grain offering, which accompanies other sacrifices. Third, there is a sacrifice that the NIV calls a fellowship offering or the NRSV a sacrifice of well-being or the CEB a communal sacrifice of well-being. While it's hard to find the right title in English, in general terms the sacrifice's significance is clear. Its distinctive feature is that God and the offerers share the sacrifice. Some is burnt and given directly to God; some is eaten by the family that makes the offering. There are three slightly different reasons why people might offer this sacrifice. One is that God has done something for them and they want to express their gratitude - maybe (for instance) they have a new baby in the family. Another is that they had promised to bring an offering in connection with asking God to do something, and God has done it - again, maybe they had prayed for a baby and they now have one. Another is simply that they want to be able to give something to God just because they want to be able to give something to God - it's a freewill offering (that expression comes from the name of this sacrifice).

These first three sacrifices are expressions of worship and fellowship between people and God and one another. After these, Leviticus comes to two other forms of sacrifice that do have to do with solving problems (as one might put it). The CEB uses the terms "purification offering" and "compensation offering," which bring out their significance. The purification offering deals with situations when people have become "unclean" or

“taboo.” They may have had to bury a family member and thus have been in contact with death, or they may have made a promise that they accidentally failed to keep. The purification offering puts one aspect of that problem right. The compensation offering puts the other aspect right, in making some restitution for what they did wrong. In addition, once a year on the Day of Atonement there were special purification offerings to deal with the various ways in which the people might have been affected by uncleanness of which they might be unaware. These special purification offerings made it possible for the community to clean its slate for the new year.

So none of these sacrifices dealt with real sin. Sacrifice wasn’t designed to deal with real sin. If you had worshiped another God or set fire to someone’s grain, you couldn’t solve the problem by offering a sacrifice. You simply had to repent and cast yourself on God’s mercy. You knew that God was a God of love and compassion and you just had to plead for God’s forgiveness. You would offer the appropriate purification offering and compensation offering as well, but the more basic resolution of the problem lay in repentance and forgiveness. As the Old Testament sometimes puts it, you would ask God to make expiation for your wrongdoing. That idea is paradoxical – expiation is by nature something an offender is responsible for. But the only person who can put the situation right when you have done wrong is God. It is God who pays the price for keeping the relationship going by being willing to forgive. Which is what God does in Jesus.

The New Testament uses the practice of sacrifice as a metaphor to help people understand what Christ was doing in being willing to sacrifice himself for us, but that is what it is doing – using a metaphor, using the imagery of sacrifice in a way that does not correspond to its original meaning. As is often the case with the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament, it is adapting as well as adopting its way of speaking.

Anger and Sacrifice

Christians often assume there is a link between sacrifice and the assuaging of God’s anger. It’s certainly the case that Old Testament and New Testament talk a lot about God’s anger as well as about sacrifice. But they never bring these two together. Leviticus, the book that tells us most about sacrifice, never mentions God’s anger in this connection. Insofar as sacrifice deals with problems, the problems are the need to be made clean and the need to make compensation for wrongdoing. No doubt God might be annoyed if people fail to make these sacrifices (though Leviticus does not say so), but the mere fact of needing to find purification or to make up for wrongdoing doesn’t mean there is any anger around.

In the Old Testament God does get really angry from time to time, and God’s anger relates to actions such as the ones we have noted – worshipping other gods or stealing someone’s land. But what you have to do when you are guilty of such actions is stop what you are doing, put right what needs putting right, and plead with God for mercy. The story of the making of the gold bullcock at Sinai is a classic illustration of these dynamics. When the people make this image and make offerings before it, God gets very angry and threatens to annihilate the people. Moses’ reaction is then not to offer a sacrifice but to urge God to have a change of mind, and God does so. It fits with this reaction that God later describes himself to Moses as one who is

characterized by compassion and forgiveness even while also being one who will punish people.

It fits with the Old Testament data that while the New Testament describes Jesus' death as a sacrifice that deals with sin, in passages such Romans 3:25; Ephesians 5:2; Hebrews 2:17; 9:26; 10:12; 1 John 2:2; 4:10, it doesn't see this sacrifice as operating by assuaging God's anger. It's rather a means of cleansing that makes it possible for us to be in the presence of the holy God. Conversely, while the New Testament emphatically declares that God is angry at human sin and that Jesus' death saves us from God's wrath, in passages such as John 3:36; Romans 1:18; 2:5-6; 5:9; and Revelation 6:16-17, it doesn't link this fact with the idea of Jesus' death as a sacrifice.

Jesus and His Compensation Offering

There is one other Old Testament passage about sacrifice that has been especially influential on Christian thinking about Christ's death. Isaiah 53 speaks of God's servant offering his life as a compensation offering to God, and also of his bearing our punishment. Oddly enough, neither of these two lines is quoted in the New Testament, unlike much of the rest of Isaiah 53. Karl Barth comments that the New Testament doesn't speak of Christ's death as his taking on the punishment for our sin, but that Isaiah 53 does do so (*Church Dogmatics* IV/1, p. 253). Actually Isaiah 53 doesn't do so, in the sense usually understood. In Isaiah 53 the word for punishment is one that usually means discipline or instruction – most of the occurrences come in Proverbs to describe teaching or correction by a parent or teacher. Thus in Isaiah 53 the KJV translates it chastisement. When Christians think of Christ bearing the punishment for our sin, they are thinking of the punishment meted out by a law court for wrongdoing, but this is not the regular connotation of this word, nor the connotation suggested by the context in Isaiah 53. The servant of God in Isaiah 53 is going through chastisement all right, going through ill-treatment at the hands of his own people and/or at the hands of the imperial authorities, but he is not going through a judicial punishment that other people thereby escape.

If you go through persecution at the hands of your own people and at the hands of others, what do you do with that experience? The possibility raised by Isaiah 53 is that you can turn it into a compensation offering. The people among whom this servant ministers have failed in their relationship with God; they have deliberately gone their own way. At the moment they have no inclination to throw themselves on God's mercy in the way I have described above. The servant himself is someone who has not gone their way. He is someone committed to walking God's way. So the vision raises a daring theological possibility. Supposing he asks God to take his life and commitment and ministry, which look likely to end in death, as a kind of sacrifice, one that could compensate for the rebelliousness of his people? (Of course by normal reckoning there is no way in which one person's obedience to death could balance the rebellion of thousands, but sacrifice never works by that kind of weighing and mathematics.)

It is that possibility that is picked up in applying this vision to Jesus. He offers his life and death as a kind of counterweight to the sin of the world; obviously the person he was opens up bigger possibilities than might

apply in the case of anyone else. So Jesus' death is a sacrifice, but not in a sense that has anything to do with God's anger or with his being punished in our place.

The Chasm

According to a common understanding, human beings are on one side of a chasm and God is on the other side. The chasm is caused by human sin. Alongside that understanding is the implication that God relates to humanity chiefly as a judge, with judges and justice understood in a Western sense: the key point about justice is treating everyone the same and a judge's key role is to safeguard standards of justice. God therefore cannot relate to us because of our legal guilt, which makes it necessary for us to be punished. In terms of the picture, human beings cannot cross the chasm except by means of Christ as bridge. This works within the legal image because he bears the legal punishment for sin, thereby making it possible for God the judge to relate to us.

From an Old Testament perspective this looks unscriptural, as well as being unlikely to aid the proper preaching of the gospel. It emphasizes the image of God as lawgiver and judge, and God is both of those, but the Old Testament does not draw the same inferences. As lawgiver, God is entirely free to pardon people if they repent. As judge, God is committed to taking the side of people in the context of relationship, even when they are in the wrong. This understanding emphasizes a more relational understanding of God than the Christian one. Thus Jewish theologians contrast faith within Judaism, which is a matter of a relationship of trust, and faith within Christianity, which is a matter of believing correct doctrine.

Although Christians link sacrifice and atonement with law and punishment, as if an animal (or a person) that is sacrificed is being punished in someone else's place, the Old Testament does not link sacrifice with legal categories. And although a price has to be paid before someone is forgiven, this need not be understood in a legal way. A more relational understanding of God fits scripture better.

The Old Testament has a number of relational pictures of God, as friend of Abraham, as husband of Jerusalem, as restorer of a needy relative, or as mother or father in relation to son or daughter. Those relational Old Testament images may help us understand what Christ achieved on the cross.

a) In 1969, Eric Clapton fell in love with the wife of his best friend, George Harrison, wrote about her the song *Layla*, and eventually stole her from Harrison. Whereas one would have expected Harrison at very least never to want to talk to Clapton again, they actually stayed as friends. That implies that Harrison absorbed within himself the pain of what Clapton did and the anger it surely aroused. Their friendship could therefore survive the wrong. (I do not know whether this is actually what Harrison did; but the story nevertheless illustrates the point.)

b) Imagine a professor coming home after a faculty meeting. It has reinforced her feelings of being powerless, underpaid, undervalued, and put down. She thus acts "crabby" in relation to her husband, who has been cooking the dinner and looking forward to enjoying a glass of wine with her. She complains that the curry is too hot and the wine isn't properly chilled.

He has two choices. He can respond in kind, "I've been here slaving over your dinner and all you do is complain." Or he can lean into the wind and absorb the bitterness that he did not earn. He can wait till it is used up, and thus look for the moment when they can relate to each other because it is gone.

c) The year I went to university, my sister married a man who my parents thought was no good. He abandoned her just after their first baby was born. Our parents had enjoyed the opportunity to begin a new life after their children had left home, but they welcomed her and her baby back into their home. Without a murmur they reshaped their life again so my sister could go to work while my mother looked after the baby, and they helped her gradually to get back to independence as a single parent. They acted as parents and next-of-kin to her, paying the price to redeem or restore her.

d) The ordinary meaning of the Hebrew word most commonly translated "forgive" is "carry." It is what parents do for their children's wrongdoing and what God was doing with Israel through Old Testament times. It was a process that came to its climax with the cross, which is the logical end to the Old Testament story. Seeing the way the relationship between God and Israel worked helps us see why the cross was necessary. Through God's life with Israel God was paying the price for that relationship, making the sacrifices to keep it going. God's people keep doing their worst to God, so eventually God paid the ultimately price for them. God showed that even killing God cannot put God off from relating to them. God will just come back from the dead.

That is the nature of sacrifice and the nature of what Christ did for us in making atonement..